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Secrecy vital to agency, says former CIA agent

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RIPON — ~~Secrecy is the foundation~~ of our intelligence system. The Central Intelligence Agency always says greater secrecy is needed. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Former CIA agent Frank Snepp emphasized that point when he spoke Wednesday at Ripon College. His speech was sponsored by the student External Affairs Committee.

Until the mid-'70s, the CIA was relatively immune from outside scrutiny, but following its involvement with the White House "plumbers" during the Nixon administration, the situation changed, Snepp said.

When a list of CIA "sins" was leaked to the press in 1973, Congress demanded accountability from the agency for the first time.

"The loss of immunity destroyed the CIA mystique," Snepp said.

A former CBS news researcher who was stationed with the CIA in Vietnam during the last years of the war, Snepp later wrote a book, "Decent Interval," on CIA activity during the fall of Saigon.

Although no secrets were revealed in his book, Snepp said, official reaction was swift. He became the subject of investigation for allegedly violating the CIA's loyalty oath. He was ordered to turn over his substantial profits from the book to the government and was "saddled with a gag order," he said.

The CIA was still in shambles from the Nixon years, Snepp said, when Admiral Stansfield Turner took it over in 1977. Disliking criticism, Turner purged the staff and created a public relations office to improve the agency's image.

"A lot of the expertise was gone after that," Snepp said. "When troubles arose in Iran and Afghanistan, there were few operatives who could speak the language." The CIA couldn't recognize that the shah was in trouble and failed to penetrate the opposition elements, he commented.

The agency is rebounding from Turner's disastrous policies, Snepp said, but its basic weakness remains. Politics play a large part in shaping its analyses, he contended, and opposing views do not easily surface.

"It is also preoccupied with technical gadgetry," Snepp said. "The CIA functions best using technical sources, uninhibited by policy decisions."

Snepp said he welcomes new guidelines prohibiting CIA intelligence operations in domestic affairs.

But he said he is deeply troubled by a continuing trend toward greater secrecy and less Congressional oversight of the agency.

President Reagan is against "outside meddling in



Frank Snepp

CIA affairs," Snepp said, "and has eased up on present oversight."

The CIA keeps even the State Department in the dark about its covert operations, he reported.

"We have to strike a balance between secrecy and public information," he said. "I'd like to codify our secrecy system and sanctify it by legislative action."

Establishment of a channel of dissent within the agency is also important, he said.

"If we had a formal channel of dissent, officers could file a complaint knowing it would be heard. The CIA doesn't have this now and a recent attempt to create one was squashed," Snepp noted.

There are legitimate functions for an intelligence agency, he said.

"As a covert action body, it should be in a position to destabilize the economy of Cuba, for example. I am personally opposed to political assassination, but some dirty tricks are acceptable. But any important operation must be approved by the president himself."

"The analysts in the CIA and the operatives must work in tandem," Snepp said.

Each covert operation must be analyzed separately on its own merits, he insisted.

"I am pragmatic and not an ideologue," he said.

"There is no consensus now for strengthening the oversight of the CIA. The First Amendment may be in grave jeopardy now.

"We could produce an agency out of control which is shaping policies."